DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 051 535 CG 006 469

AUTHOR Boardman, William K.
TITLE Comparison of Drug Attitudes of College Freshmen: Metropolitan Area Vs. University Community Setting.
INSTITUTION Georgia Univ., Athens.; Southwestern Psychological Association, Austin, Tex.
PUB DATE 29 Apr 71
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Southwestern Psychological Association Convention in San Antonio, Texas, April 29-May 1, 1971

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *College Freshmen, *Drug Abuse, Lysergic Acid Diethylamide, Marihuana, Narcotics, Questionnaires, *Social Attitudes, *Student Attitudes, *Student Behavior

ABSTRACT

A "Social Attitude Questionnaire" was used to obtain anonymous replies from 481 University of Houston (U.H.) and 470 University of Georgia (U. Ga.) freshmen concerning drug use and related attitudes. Among the most significant results were: (1) more U.H. freshmen endorsed negative statements about their parents than did U. Ga. students; (2) the reported rate of drug use was low (20%) for both groups when "user" referred to a person taking drugs more than once a month; (3) more U. Ga. freshmen use stimulants, and fewer use LSD than U.H. freshmen; and (4) student attitudes toward their drug-using contemporaries is positive and permissive, though this does not reflect a personal commitment to participate in the actual use of drugs. (Author/TL)

ED051535

COMPARISON OF DRUG ATTITUDES OF COLLEGE FRESHMEN: METROPOLITAN AREA VS. UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY SETTING[1]

William K. Boardman

University of Georgia

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Since university campuses have been at the center of the current "drug scene" since its beginnings, one would expect university students to show much involvement with and participation in drug use. When this expectancy is combined with the assumed influence of a metropolitan environment on the incidence of drug use in adolescents, one would anticipate that drug use among students at a metropolitan university would be widespread, and further, that it would exceed the incidence found at a university in a small, isolated community. To investigate the issue of whether enrollment at a metropolitan university is related to greater use of drugs and more acceptance of values supporting drug use, a sample of the 1970 freshman class at the University of Houston[2] (U.H.) was compared with a similar group at the University of Georgia[3] (U.Ga.). While freshmen are not representative of the total student body of a university and cannot provide comprehensive data regarding drug-related behavior and attitudes on campus, the comparison of large numbers of students from a single class increases the reliability of findings for that group. Also, the sampling of freshmen allows

CG 006 469

interpretation of the data with regards to the question of whether or not observed differences in the two campus groups might relate to the student choice of attending a metropolitan vs. a small community campus.

The subjects were 481 (257 male and 224 female) U.H. freshmen and 470 (227 male and 243 female) U.Ga. freshmen. All made anonymous returns of a "Social Attitude Questionnaire" (SAQ) composed of 69 multiple choice and 11 true-false items. Only U.H. students living in dormitories were contacted, as day students would not be expected to have the same degree of involvement in campus life as the U.Ga. students. The effort was made to obtain a representative U.Ga. sample, with most students being contacted in (required) freshman english classes.

The SAQ contained items yielding demographic data, family experiences and attitudes, social behavior, incidence of use of tobbacco and alcohol and attitudes related to their use, incidence of use of drugs by the student, his family and peers, and finally, reasons for and attitudes toward drug use.[4]

Results

The two freshman groups were compared item by item, without regard to sex, using a Chi-square test of significance. With respect to demographic variables, social behavior, parental

behavior and attitudes, High School achievements, and family life, they were consistently similar. In addition, the tendency of most students to give the same response to multiple choice questions regarding their family and background suggests that the two groups were not only quite similar, but also homogeneous.

One content area did show consistent differences. Questions relating to the student's attitudes toward his family showed more U.Ga. students perceiving their family and home life positively (Table 1). All items in this content area did

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Table 1 about here
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not differ, but there were no significant reversals. U.Ga. freshmen are apparently consistent in regarding themselves as better endowed, emotionally and materially than their U.H. peers.

Responses regarding drug use and reasons for using drugs are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 about here

Fewer U.H. freshmen report using alcohol, or using stimulants within 6 months. Fewer U.Ga. freshmen report using LSD within 6 months. More U.H. freshmen report using

drugs before age 17, and more U.Ga. freshmen report smoking marijuana 10 or more times within 6 months. Reported use of opiates by both groups was low.

Only 14% of U.H. and 18% of U.Ga. freshmen report themselves as using drugs (item 48e). When these percentages are compared with item 33, they are seen to be very close to the percentages of students who report using drugs more than once a month. Apparently freshmen on both campuses who use a drug more than once a month consider themselves to be "using drugs," while others who use drugs less frequently do not. Surprisingly, 70.8% and 63%, respectively, of the two groups report that they have never used drugs, while 71.6% and 60% report they have no intention of using them in the future (item 27). When one combines the "using" and "never used" groups, there is a residual of 16% U.H. and 19% U.Ga. freshmen who, presumably, have tried drugs but do not consider themselves as using drugs. These groups are as large as the "using" groups.

The percentages of freshmen on both campuses who do not consider themselves as actively using drugs are considerably higher than would obtain in populations where drug use is considered the norm. Does the relatively low rate of drug use indicate that freshmen share a common identity as drug users without participating in actual drug consumption, or does the

public's impression of widespread drug use on campuses derive solely from the activities of a "vocal minority" of student drug users? Students' replies to attitudinal questions suggest an answer (Table 2). The numbers of freshmen who believe that drugs produce pleasurable experiences, that marijuana is safe, that first offenders charged with marijuana possession should be treated leniently, and that drug use is a social/moral-ethical problem, are significantly greater than the number of freshmen using drugs. Apparently the freshmen have an attitude of permissiveness toward their drug using contemporaries, but this attitude is not reflected in their own rate of drug use or their anticipated attitude toward the use of marijuana by their own children (item 46).

Conclusions

The findings do not suggest a direct relationship between drug use reported by university freshmen and their location in a metropolitan area as contrasted to a small, relatively isolated university community. Differences emerged between the two student groups both in patterns of drug usage and in attitudes toward the family. The differences with respect to reported drug use were differences in <u>types</u> of drugs and not in the number of students reporting drug use. This points to variations in popularity of particular drugs (e.g., stimulants)

and represents quite a different phenomenon than would a difference in overall rate of drug use. On both campuses freshmen appear to consider themselves to be in the "I use drugs" category if their rate of drug use exceeds once per month. This suggests a common social consensus as to the identity of the campus drug user.

The most significant finding was that the reported number of drug users was small in both groups, contrasting to the popular conception that drug use is normative behavior for college students. In addition, at least as many freshmen reported that they had used drugs but were not currently using them as there were who reported continued use. Not only do the majority in the samples not appear to be using drugs, but attending college did not produce a continued use of drugs in a majority of students who had sampled them. While student attitudes toward drug using contemporaries tended to be positive and permissive, there was not a corresponding personal commitment to use of drugs. Entering freshmen at either of the universities studied need not expect the majority of their classmates to be using drugs, although positive attitudes toward those who do are expressed by a majority of freshmen.

Footnotes

[1]Paper delivered at Southwestern Psychological Association annual convention, San Antonio, Texas, April 29, 1971. Appreciation is expressed to Elna H. White, Texas Research Institute, for supplying the data on University of Houston freshmen.

[2]Metropolitan Houston, Texas, has a population of 1.700,000 (1970 census). The University of Houston had a Fall, 1970, enrollment of 25,600, with a freshmen class of 6,056.

[3]Athens, Georgia, has a population (including university students) of 44,000 (1970 census). It is in a rural setting, 50 miles from any city of similar size, and 65 miles from Atlanta. The University of Georgia had a Fall, 1970, enrollment of 18,200, with a freshman class of 3200.

[4]The term "drug" included marijuana.

TABLE 1

Comparison of attitudes toward parents and family life[5]

Item No.		U.H.%	U.Ga.%
9.	Father's work is professional, managerial, or proprietor	54	64
10.	Parents are: a married and living together	83	89
	b divorced/separated	10	5
17.	How much money do you have to spend each week? a under $2	12	4
	b $2 to $5	28	20
	c $5 to $10	36	34
	d $10 or more	20	41
TF1.	At times I have very much wanted to leave home (true).	52	45
TF3.	My people treat me more like a child than a grown-up (true).	18	12
TF4.	There is little love and companionship in my family as compared to others (true).	14	7
TF6.	My parents and family find more fault with me than they should (true).	19	13
TF9.	I have been quite independent and free from family rule (true).	50	61

[5]All comparisons in TABLE 1 differ at the .01 level of confidence except TF1., which differs at the .02 level. Percentage values rounded off.

TABLE 2

Comparisons of drug use and reasons for using drugs[6]

Item No.		U.H.%	U.Ga.%
23.	Do not use tobacco	71	74
25.	Do not use alcohol	31	24***
27.	a have used drugs - am still using them	9	15*
	b have used drugs - might use them again	11	17***
	c have used drugs - not using them again	9	5
	d have not used drugs - might try them	8	8
	e have not used drugs - not going to use them	63	55***
33.	How often do you use drugs?		
	a not at all	78	70***
	b once a month or less	7	12
	c twice a month	4	6
	d once a week	4	6
	e twice a week or more	5	5
52.	a Not used barbituates in last 6 months	92	92
55.	e Used marijuana 10 or more times in last 6 months	13	19*
56.	a Not used LSD in last 6 months	91	96***
58.	Not used opiates in last 6 months	96	98
59.	Not used stimulants in the last 6 months	86	80***
63.	First used drugs at age 16 or younger	15	9**
	Most frequently checked reasons for taking drugs		
34.	b Relieve or escape tension or worry	37	36
35.	e Curiosity	30	34
36.	c Drugs make you feel good	36	43
37.	b Good way to change your mood	23	35

TABLE 2 (cont.)

Item No.		U.H.%	U.Ga.%
48.	Which of the following is most like your reason for not using drugs?		
	a Drugs are dangerous to my health	29	29
	b Drugs are illegal	13	12
	c My parents do not approve of drug use	2	2
	d I have other things I enjoy doing	39	36
	e I use drugs	14	18
44.	e I think marijuana is safe	33	36
45.	e I think marijuana is unsafe	40	37
47.	First offense for marijuana possession should result in a jail sentence	24	13***
46.	If you were a parent and your child told you he had decided to smoke marijuana - what would you do?		
	a Tell him that drug use might harm him	57	61
	b Nothing - it should be legal anyway	4	3
	c Try to stop him by punishment	5	4
	d Tell him it way okay, use it carefully	19	20
	e Insist he see a doctor	11	9

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[6] *significant at the .05 level of confidence
**significant at the .02 level of confidence
***significant at the .01 level of confidence
Percentage values rounded off.